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PLAIN STONE VASES FROM BISMYA.

By Edgar James Banks,
The University of Chicago.

Along the northwestern edge of the platform of the Bismya temple which was constructed of plano-convex bricks, at a period not far from 4500 B. C., was discovered an inclined plain leading from the temple inclosure below. In the corner formed by the platform and the inclined plain was the refuse heap of the temple. While digging along the edge of the platform the workmen came upon this ancient temple dump. This layer of débris, which was about half a meter in thickness, covered a spot about four meters long and two wide; above it was scarcely a meter of dirt.

It is usually from the refuse matter of the ancients that the archæologist may reconstruct their life and history. Many of the most valuable of the treasures from the Babylonian mounds were discarded as worthless; this may be said of the famous Telloh statues in the Louvre. Two marble heads from Bismya, of which one belonged to the statue of the Sumerian king David, were found lying together in the corner of a room of later construction, as if abandoned by a child who had used them for playthings. So our ancient Bismya temple dump, from which the priest probably turned his face as he passed, contained some most valuable antiquities. From it the workmen removed dozens of baskets of fragments of stone vases of almost every conceivable shape. An occasional bit of terra-cotta, or of a plano-convex brick, appeared, but most of the fragments were marble, some were alabaster, a few were porphyry, some onyx or sandstone or freestone; all were polished; some were engraved with a simple design; others were elaborately wrought with the figures of men and of animals; a few were inlaid with ivory and precious stones, and others were inscribed with the name of the temple or of an unknown king. With two or three exceptions, all were fragmentary; one or two lamps were found complete. For more than a week my daily occupation consisted in washing the stone fragments discovered the previous day, scrubbing away the hard dirt, and scraping off the saltpeter which clung to them; an inscription or an engraving, or fragments which would fit together to form a complete vase, was the frequent reward. A few of the fragments were large enough to enable me to reconstruct the shape and to ascertain the dimensions of the original vase.

The time when the corner by the inclined plain ceased to be a dumping-ground was not far from 4500 B. C.; in it were fragments of none but plano-convex bricks; it was concealed beneath the platform of a pre-Sargonic temple; the inscriptions found upon some of the vases bear the name of no known king, yet the frequent occurrence of the name of the temple in characters as ancient as any yet discovered, and the fact that at a later period terra-cotta supplanted stone, which was more difficult to obtain and to work, all point to the fifth millennium.

Where did the ancients who lived in the stoneless, alluvial plain obtain the great variety of beautiful material for their vases? It is an old theory that the stone for the Telloh statues was brought from the Sinaitic peninsula; those who advocated it had probably never crossed the Arabian desert, or followed down the Euphrates, or been in the great plateau of central Arabia. Almost every variety of stone is found there. Sargon, of 3800 B. C., went to the Mediterranean, and the Mesopotamian Arabs of to-day bring great stones from the sacred mountains about Mecca, which they hew into mortars for pounding coffee; yet these are no reasons to suppose that the ancients went farther than the neighboring mountains for their stone. White marble is the most common; not far from Deir on the Euphrates is a mountain of white marble. The desert toward Hayil is strewn with great bowlders of diorite.

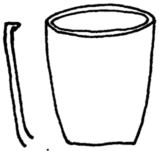
How did the ancients shape their vases? Most of the vases are circular; Nos. 45 and 47 are oval; No. 38 is oblong; No. 23 is square; Nos. 44 and 46 are shell-shape; the remainder are circular. The stone employed was generally marble, so soft that one might scratch it with the finger nail; less frequently appear vases of onyx, alabaster, porphyry, sandstone, freestone, and in a single instance granite was discovered in the temple dump. The perfect symmetrical curve of the circle and the uniform symmetry in every part of the vase indicate the employment of the lathe, or some contrivance which answered the purpose. A lathe must also have been used in the manufacture of seal cylinders. In the circular vases the stone was so highly polished that all marks of the lathe were obliterated; in the shell-shaped lamps, Nos. 44 and 46, the marks of the chisel, in spite of the polish, are visible. The instrument used in cutting the softer stone might have been flint; flint saws were commonly employed during the fifth millennium. Bronze, silver, gold, and an alloy of bronze and gold were known to the Babylonians of that period.

Whence did the Babylonians derive the variety of beautiful shapes which they imparted to their vases? Unless it was from their own imaginative minds, it would be difficult to surmise. Beneath the Bismya temple were various strata filled with the remains of previous ages; the lowest could not have dated far from 10000 B. C. Possibly the beautiful forms are the result of an important stride in their own civilization. The more one learns of the culture of the dwellers of Mesopotamia of the fifth millennium B. C., the more he is convinced that then was their golden era.

What use in the temple service was made of the vases? Nos. 44, 45, and 46 were olive-oil lamps; their shapes were derived from the conch, which also at an earlier period was employed as a lamp. In No. 45 the projection which resembles a handle is a groove for containing the wick; the lower part, terminating in the head of an animal, is the support. It is possible that in the Babylonian temple, as in the later Jewish synagogue, lights were continually burning. Some of the vases appear to have been ornamental; the interior, as in No. 28, was so shallow, or in Nos. 10, 11, and 20 so small, that they could be of little practical use. The walls of vases represented by No. 9, the most common form, were sometimes worn away by perpetual use, until a hole resulted. The inscribed vases, usually of a more fantastic shape, which I do not describe in the present paper, were evidently presented to the temple as votive objects; undoubtedly many or all of the inscribed vases found their way to the temple in a similar manner; this, however, does not preclude their employment in the temple service. One may imagine that some of the vases were used as drinking-cups; some of the larger, as No. 1, for the storage of water; some for the storage of oil for the lamps; some for incense; some might have been filled with food and placed before the statues of the gods; some were probably bowls for ablution; No. 47, which was not found in the temple dump, but in a private house near the west corner of the ruins, was a cosmetic vase with traces of *henna* in one compartment and *kohl* in the other. Many of the fragments were coated with a black substance; others were as clear in the interior as on the exterior. Whatever the use of each vase may have been cannot now be determined; however, this ancient dump-heap describes the fittings of the temple of six thousand years ago as possessing a service of a magnificence which was never equaled in later Babylonian times, and hardly surpassed in the classical times of Rome and Greece.

DESCRIPTION OF VASES.

	Height	Diameter	Thickness of wall
1. White marble	29.0 cm.	at top 27.0 cm.	3.0 cm.
2. Yellow limestone	8.0	23.0	1.6
3. Hard yellowish marble	5.0	12.0	0.4
4. Hard yellowish marble	?	4.5	0.3
5. White marble	11.0	18.0	
6. Alabaster	?	12.0	
7. Onyx with reddish bands	10.0	15.0	1.3
8. Pinkish onyx	9.0	16.0?	0.8
9. Yellowish marble in various sizes, a common form.			
10. White marble	6.0	7.5	
11. White marble	7.0	9.0	
12. Yellowish marble	5.0	16.0	0.6
13. Alabaster	12.0	30.0	
14. Alabaster	6.5	10.5	1.5
15. Alabaster	9.0	14.0	1.1
16. Alabaster	10.0	?	1.4
17. Onyx	8.0?	?	0.7
18. Onyx	6.5	8.0	1.1
19. Onyx	15.0+	19.0	2.1
20. White marble	8.0	8.0	2.5
21. Alabaster	18.0	16.0	3.0
22. Porphyry	12.0+	10.0?	2.0
23. White marble	?	?	
24. Blue freestone	9.0	14.3	0.7
25. Porphyry	5.5	?	0.5
26. White marble	11.0	8.5	1.5
27. White marble	7.0	12.0	1.5
28. White marble	28.0	28.0	
29. White marble	22.0?	greatest 35.0	
30. Soft limestone	11.0	at top 12.0	1.2
31. Gray sandstone	11.0	" 16.0	1.5
32. Green porphyry	10.0	" 29.0	2.0
33. Yellow marble	7.0	" 20.0	1.5
34. White marble	8.0	" 12.0	
35. Alabaster	9.5	" 10.0	0.8
36. White marble	10.0	at base 6 0	1.0
37. White marble	9.0+	" 10.0	0.9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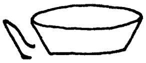
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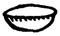
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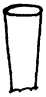
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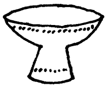
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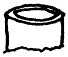
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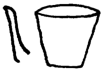
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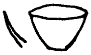
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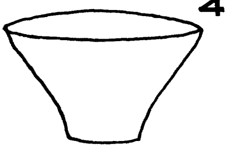
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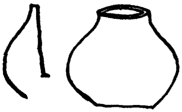
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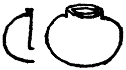
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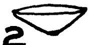
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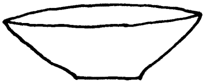
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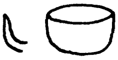
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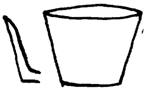
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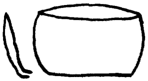
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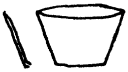
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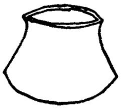
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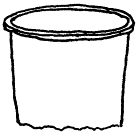
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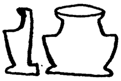
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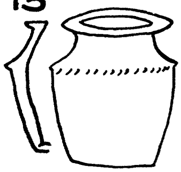
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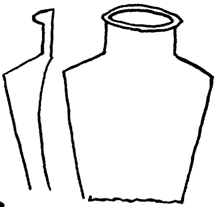
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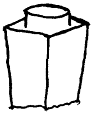
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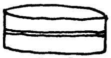
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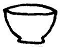
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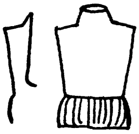
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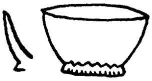
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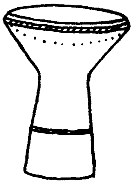
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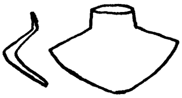
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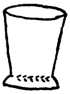
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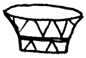
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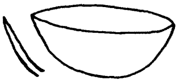
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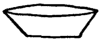
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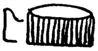
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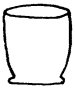
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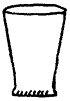
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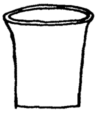
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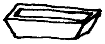
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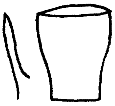
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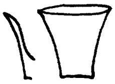
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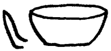
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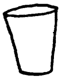
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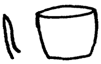
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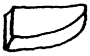
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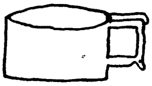
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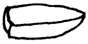
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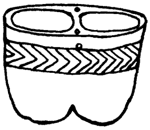
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DESCRIPTION OF VASES—*Continued.*

	Height	Diameter	Thickness of wall
38. White marble	8.0 cm.	at top 11×18 cm.	1.5 cm.
39. White marble . . .	13.0	" 10.0?	1.5
40. White marble	10.0	at base 5.5	1.5
41. White marble . . .	8.0	at top 16.0?	1.8
42. White marble	9.0	at base 4.3	0.6
43. Alabaster	6.0	" 4.2	1.0
44. White marble lamp . . .	6.0	length 16? width 9	
45. Alabaster lamp . . .	12.0	oval shaped shortest diameter 14 longest diameter 20	
46. White marble lamp . . .	5.5	length 18 width 13	
47. White marble cosmetic vase from III . .	6.0	width 4 length 9	